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SENSITIVE

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SUBJECT: FRG PROTESTS CONTINUE

REF: GUATEMALA 1900

1. (U) An estimated 3,000 to 5,000 pro-Rios Montt protesters remained overnight at several locations in the capital and continue to surround the Constitutional Court, the Supreme Court, and the Supreme Electoral Tribunal building. A tense calm has returned to Guatemala City for the moment, with very light traffic flowing and no tires burning as of 8:30 a.m. local time. Radio reports indicate that busses with FRG supporters have left Coban, Totonicapan and the south coast bringing more protesters into Guatemala City. Protests are expected to resume later this morning.

2. (U) Around 6:00 PM, July 24, security forces successfully evacuated some 900 people from a commercial center owned by opposition financier Dionisio Gutierrez. Protesters later withdrew from the entrance of La Canada, allowing numerous officials, politicians, and diplomats to reach their residences. All U.S. mission personnel were able to spend the night in their own homes. The Embassy opened on July 25 with essential personnel only.

3. (U) Rios Montt gave a press conference at 8:00 PM on July 24 in which he implausibly denied that the disturbances were organized by "the Executive Committee of the FRG," while acknowledging that the protesters were his supporters. He dodged questions about the activities of FRG Congressmen, such as Juan Santa Cruz, who were shown on television coordinating activities of the protesters. When asked why the FRG protesters had targeted the offices of Dionisio Gutierrez, he said "I didn't send them to (Gutierrez's office), I told them to go to the Supreme Court." Caught in the apparent contradiction with his earlier statement that he had not been involved in the organization of the protests, his handlers called an immediate end to the press conference and removed the 76 year old former general from the room.

4. (U) President Portillo gave a seven minute address to the nation on the afternoon of July 24, saying that the police and army would maintain order and protect private property. There was a noticeable absence of police, however, throughout the day at most protest locations.

5. (SBU) On the evening of July 24, the Ambassador met with representatives of civil society, the private sector and political parties (at their request). Participants, whose spirits were clearly inflamed by the violent events of the day, accused the GOG of being complicit along with the FRG in the violence, noting that despite public assurances from President Portillo and Minister of Government Reyes Calderon, police did nothing to stop the violence. Many saw the violent protests as aimed at intimidating the opposition by showing them that the FRG knows where they live and work, and the police will do nothing to protect them. Several civil society leaders noted that the FRG's willingness to use violence makes it important that the election observation effort be expanded. Others said it was time for the OAS to call a special Permanent Council session and invoke the Democratic Charter. The Ambassador told the opposition, civil society and private sector leaders that our efforts in the immediate term would be aimed at securing the restoration of public order, and that following the return of normalcy it would be important to take stock of where the electoral process stands.

6. (SBU) The Ambassador is seeking meetings on July 25 with Foreign Minister Gutierrez, Minister of Government Calderon, and National Pol